

# The Dutch school system

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# Appendix A

## The Dutch school system

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The school system in the Netherlands is highly stratified from secondary education onwards, and can generally be divided into vocational-oriented tracks and academic tracks. The first transition, from primary education to secondary education, takes place at the age of 12. The transition to post-secondary education (intermediate vocational education, vocational colleges and universities) takes place at between age 16 and 18, depending on which secondary education track the student followed.

Primary education, organized in the so-called 'basisschool', is an all-day school and lasts for eight years, up until the age of 12. Compulsory education starts at the age of 5 (although most children enter primary education at age 4) and ends at the age of 16. At the age of 12, pupils enter secondary education. Secondary education is distinguished in three tracks:

- 1 pre-university education (VWO): we will refer to this as the pre-university track ('VWO');
- 2 higher general secondary education (HAVO): we will refer to this as the pre-college track ('HAVO');
- 3 pre-vocational education (VMBO): we will refer to this as the pre-vocational track (VMBO). Within VMBO several sub-tracks are distinguished that differ in theoretical and practical orientation.

Admission to these tracks is based on the scores of the pupil on a nationwide standardized skills test, the so-called 'Centraal Instituut voor Toets Ontwikkeling' (CITO) tests, as well as recommendations of the teacher at the end of primary school. In order to facilitate the transition to secondary education, pupils are placed in so-called orientation classes ('brugklas') in the first (age 12) and sometimes second grade (age 13) of secondary education. These orientation classes are meant to postpone the final track placement until the end of the first or second grade. In many cases the orientation classes combine two adjacent tracks, but schools are autonomous in the way they organize this: some maintain separate classes for each track, others combine all three tracks of secondary education.

Both primary education and secondary education also have a system of special education for pupils with learning problems or physical handicaps.

The arrows in Figure A.1 indicate the possible routes for proceeding from one track to the other in the educational system. The bold arrows indicate the main routes. Vertical upward transitions to the higher school tracks are allowed when appropriate levels beneath them have been completed. Downward transitions to lower tracks are possible at any time.

Only the two highest tracks in secondary education prepare for higher education, which is the pre-college track (HAVO) for vocational colleges (HBO) and the pre-university track (VWO) for university (WO). The pre-vocational track (VMBO) prepares for upper secondary vocational education (MBO). In general, the more theoretical oriented sub-tracks prepare students for the long (three or four years) tracks in upper secondary vocational education (MBO), while the more practical oriented sub-tracks prepare for the short (one or two years) tracks and the apprenticeship training. Each school path after primary education follows a specified path to the next track. The system thereby also allows for transitions 'within' the secondary and post-secondary education level. The most relevant 'within'-transitions at the secondary education level are from the theoretical oriented sub-track in pre-vocational education (VMBO) to the pre-college track (HAVO) and from the pre-college track (HAVO) to the pre-university track (VWO). At the post-secondary education level, the most relevant transitions are from upper secondary vocational education (MBO) to vocational colleges (HBO) and from vocational colleges (HBO) to university (WO).

In 2000, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science introduced the concept of a starting qualification ('startkwalifikatie') to establish a minimum credential for young people that confers eligibility for the labour market. Those who do not attain a starting qualification are considered to be early school-leavers. Diplomas of tracks that provide a starting qualification are pre-college track (HAVO), pre-university track (VWO) and upper secondary vocational education of at least two years (MBO at level two), which is the level of a 'basic skilled worker' (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). Although compulsory education ends in the year that a pupil turns 16 ('leerplicht'), one is obliged to stay in education until the starting qualification is obtained or until one turns 18 ('kwalificatieplicht').

The transition to higher education around the age of 17/18 depends very much on attainment at the secondary education level. Having gained a diploma from the pre-university track (VWO), the student gains automatic access to university (WO), while a diploma from a pre-college track (HAVO) gives automatic access to vocational college (HBO). The diplomas are awarded on the basis of national public examinations as well as school examinations. The national examinations ensure that the quality of diplomas is more or less similar nationwide. Some programmes in higher education, however, may impose additional requirements on students (for example, restricted access to higher education programmes in medicine and the arts).

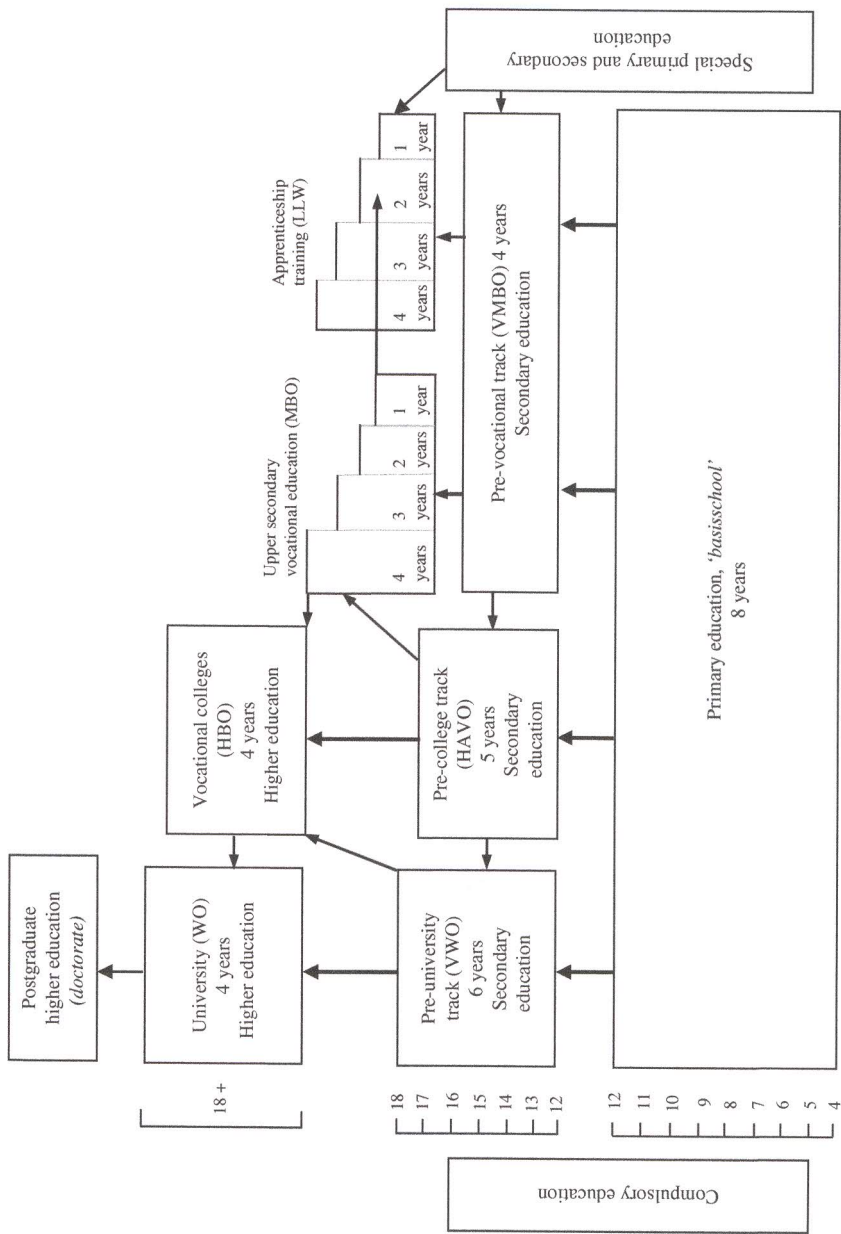


Figure A.1 The Dutch educational system.



Table A.1 Some key statistics

Percentage of early school-leavers at the age of 18–24 <sup>a</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-27	
2000	15.4	13.8	11.7	14.6	9.0	13.3	18.2	7.3	17.6	
2010	10.1	11.9	10.7	11.9	10.3	12.6	14.9	9.7	14.1	
2. Percentage of 15-year-old pupils with scant reading skills <sup>b</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-19	
2003	11.5	17.9	16.5	22.3	5.7	17.5	—	13.3	18.5	
2009	14.4	17.7	15.2	18.5	8.1	19.7	18.5	17.5	20.6	
3. Percentage of HE graduates at the age of 30–35 <sup>a</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-27	
2000	26.5	35.2	32.1	25.7	40.3	27.4	29.0	31.8	22.4	
2010	41.4	44.4	47.0	29.8	45.7	43.5	43.0	45.8	33.6	
4. Mathematics, science and technology enrollment as % of all students <sup>a</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-27	USA
2000	16.8	21.0	20.2	28.6	36.2	N.A	28.8	30.6	26.2	N.A.
2009	14.7	17.6	18.3	29.7	35.6	25.5	22.7	25.2	24.5	17.8
5. Percentage of unemployed in the age group 15 to 24 years old compared to the total labour force in that age group <sup>a</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-27	USA
2010	8.7	22.4	13.8	9.9	21.4	23.7	19.6	25.2	21.1	18.4
6. Employment Protection Legislation Index <sup>c</sup>										
	NLD	BEL	DNK	DEU	FIN	FRA	GBR	SWE	EU-27	USA
2003	2.1	2.2	1.4	2.2	2.0	3.0	0.7	2.2	—	0.2

Sources: <sup>a</sup> EUROSTAT, <sup>b</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2011), <sup>c</sup> OECD (2004).

Table A.1 provides some key statistics on the performance of the Dutch education system. To put these figures into perspective, we compared these with some other countries. In line with the EU Lisbon goals, the Netherlands reduced the number of early school leavers (those defined earlier as school-leavers without a ‘starting qualification’) from 15.4 per cent in 2000 to 10.9 per cent in 2009. Although the goal of a reduction of 50 per cent was not reached, the Netherlands did a relatively good job compared to most other countries. The average decrease in the EU-27 in the same period was from 17.6 per cent to 14.1 per cent. Interestingly, some of the countries that previously performed much better on this indicator (Finland: 9 per cent in 2000; Sweden: 7.3 per cent in 2000) even saw an increase in the percentage of early school-leavers in that same period. This indicates that it may be difficult to further decrease the percentage of early school-leavers.

The Netherlands perform relatively well when it comes to the development of key skills. Results of the PISA-survey (OECD, 2010), show that the Netherlands consistently ranks in the top five of European countries or the top ten of all countries. In the last PISA-survey, the Netherlands lost its top-ten position due to the inclusion of some new high ranking countries like Shanghai and Singapore. The good position of the Netherlands is specifically due to the fact that the Netherlands perform relatively well in the lower tail of the skills distribution, as can be seen in Table A.1 which indicates the percentage of students with below minimum reading proficiency levels. The Netherlands ranks among the top five in reading skills when we look at the bottom 10 per cent, among the top ten when we look at the skills between the bottom 10 per cent and top 15 per cent, but only in the top 20 when we look at the top 10 per cent of excellent students (Vermeer and Van der Steeg, 2011).

Table A.1 also indicates the position of the Netherlands when it comes to the share of higher education graduates. The share of higher education graduates increased from 26.5 per cent in 2000 to 41.4 per cent in 2010. This is more or less the same as the relative increase for the whole EU-27 which increased from 22.4 per cent to 33.6 per cent. Although the share of higher educated in the Netherlands is higher than the EU average, some other countries like Denmark and Finland clearly outperform the Netherlands. Also of interest are the differences in study fields. The share of Dutch students enrolled in math, science or technology programmes is relatively low compared to the EU average: only some 15 per cent of Dutch students are enrolled in these kind of programmes, compared to some 25 per cent in the EU. Specifically a country like Finland shows a much higher enrollment in the science and technology programmes.

The Netherlands performs really well when it comes to employment chances. The youth unemployment rate is at 8.7 per cent, the lowest in Europe, with only Germany having a comparable low rate of 9.9 per cent. The other countries in the table have unemployment rates that vary between 15 and 25 per cent. This is only partly related to the regulation of the labour market. The OECD has made an index of the overall strictness of the employment protection regulation. In a very regulated labour market it is more difficult for outsiders like school leavers to enter and compete successfully with existing employees. The score ranges from 0 to 5 and the Netherlands has a position somewhere in the middle range. On one of its components, however, the regulation of temporary employment, the Netherlands scores relatively well. Indeed many school leavers will start with a temporary contract, making it easier for employers to dismiss them when they are not functioning well.